New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Eugenia"

Journal American

January 31, 1957

Bankhead Still Tallu --But Play's a Snafu!

By JOHN McCLAIN

YOU must be a devout Tallulah Bankhead fan or I would not advise you to go near the Ambassador Theatre these nights. And by "devout" I really mean blindly and hopelessly subjugated to Miss B.'s allure, for otherwise when you witness her new play, "Eugenia," an adaptation by Randolph Carter from a novel by Henry James, you will wonder by what perverse alchemy the whole thing took place.

For it is neither especially fanciful nor funny; the story unwinds in a pattern familiar to the most vagrant theatregoer; it gives Miss Bankhead few moments in which to display her true talents, her gift for humor and heart, and it seemed to me that even she was aware of the faltering battle she was fighting before the evening was out of short pants. Something good must be said about it, so I'll say it: it is pretty.

The pedestrian situation of an expatriate American woman, coming back to New England after a morganatic marriage to a European Prince, holds faint promise to begin with. But as we see the obvious developments take shape, without the aid of any ingenious or notably comedic highlights, one is apt to wonder once again why John C. Wilson chose this as a vehicle for Miss Bankhead's return to the boards.

Little Conviction

Of course the madcap Baroness (the best title the Prince could arrange for her) has a simple heart of gold beating under her blase and wicked European exterior. She moves into a conservative and wealthy household, captivates every relative in sight, regenerates a Harvard student, re-arranges the incipient love affair of everybody including the local vicar and then, naturally, outwits herself in the end. As the curtain falls she announces that she will just spend the rest of her life "roaming the world in a macintosh."

Miss Bankhead is not supposed to mean a syllable of this line, to be sure, but it seemed to me that much of what she was obliged to say carried little more conviction. Obviously there were moments of hilarity when the old baritone croak and the throw-away delivery came to life—but there weren't enough of them. It was said before the show arrived that Miss B. was happily creating a character once more; I'm afraid, however, this is one she will relegate to a far corner in her memory.

In her support Scott Merrill wrests courageously with the role of her brother, an artist who is always with her. But again, and due to no fault of his, I was unable to believe that any such figure could have existed, even in 1878, when the play was laid.

"EUGENIA"

Play in three acts and seven scenes, adapted by Randolph Carter from Henry James' "The Europeans"; staged by Herbert Machiz; designed by Oliver Smith; lighting by Peggy Clark; costumes by Miles White; presented by John C. Wilson in association with Theatre Corporation of America at the Ambassador Theatre, January 30, 1957. The cast:

Mr. Wentworth.....Reynolds Evans
Gertrude Wentworth.....Anne Meacham
Charlotte Wentworth.....Irma Hurley
Rev. Alfred Brand.....Robert Duke
Felix Da Costa.....Scott Merrill
Eugenia, Baroness Munster,.. Tallulah Bankhead
Robert Acton.....Jay Barney
Elizabeth Acton.....June Hunt
Clifford Wentworth.....Tom Ellis
Marie.....Therese Quadri

Costumes Bright

As her possible suitor Jay Barney came closest to reality, and Anne Meacham gave it a noble try as the daughter of her half-brother, in whose home the charade unfolds.

But to come to the small, bright segment of the evening: the costumes, especially Miss Bankhead's, executed by Miles White, are consistently fetching and brilliant; Oliver Smith has also added to the mounting with a realistic set of a guest house near Boston.

Tallulah's fabulous appeal is still there when it's given a chance; but in "Eugenia" the chances are few and feeble.

New York Post

January 31, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

Tallulah Bankhead and Something

Since Tallulah Bankhead and "Eugenia" appeared on the same stage last night, I suppose it is safe to report that there was some connection between Miss Bankhead and Randolph Carter's dramatization of Henry James' novel, "The Europeans." At least, the two of them gave their first performances at the Ambassador Theater simultaneously. Otherwise, however, there seemed to me only the most incidental relationship involved, and I must say that the actress offered considerably the better show.

This, by the way, isn't the greatest of compliments. Miss Bankhead strutted and fretted, and gave out occasional roars, in her highly specialized and approved manner, and it is always entertaining to see her in action. For an outspoken lady, she has turned into rather a mushmouth, and it was sometimes surprisingly difficult to understand what she was saying last night, but, on the basis of the dialogue that was audible, I venture to suggest that this was one of the virtues of her playing.

Luck of Henry James

If the star's performance appeared to have comparatively little to do with the play, it is only fair to add that Mr. Carter's adaptation had even less to do with dramatic effectiveness. Never having read "The Europeans," I'm in no position to state how much "Eugenia" has to do with the novel, but it certainly represents another disaster in the series of efforts to bring Henry James to the stage in interesting terms. Compared to it, the earlier "Child of Fortune" was a triumph.

Nor did I think it was at all aided by the direction of Herbert Machiz. There are not many characters in the play, but they kept rushing about the stage without any particular aim or point, and occasionally they varied the resulting monotony by lining up as if they were on the verge of going in for a musical number. It might have helped things, too, if they had given us a couple of songs. They assuredly wouldn't have interrupted any significant dramatic action.

Back to Europe

All that happens is that Miss Bankhead and Scott Merrill, as a couple of half European relations of a family of eminent 1878 Bostonians, return to their ancestral New England home, and shock the natives by their continental manners and reputations. Instead of causing trouble, though, they turn out to be a good influence on youth, and Mr. Merrill wins a bride. Miss Bankhead, on the other hand, loses her prospective catch and sets out gallantly for other adventures overseas.

All of us know how splendid Miss Bankhead can be when she gets a role with some dramatic strength, as she did only too many years ago in "The Little Foxes," and it seems all the greater pity when she has to go in for her vaudeville repertory. She also dons a Mandarin robe and looks like Auntie Mame. Mr. Merrill plays effectively, Jay Barney puts a touch of life into his part, and June Hunt adds attractive vitality in a small assignment. But "Eugenia" is amazingly pallid.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 31, 1957

A Tedious Time With Tallulah

By TOM DONNELLY.

I have read my fair share of the works of Henry James, but his novel "The European" is one I haven't gotten around to yet. I'm not going to cross it off my list, either, just because it has been turned into an excessively dull play called "Eugenia" (at the Ambassador). We all know by this time that you can't judge a James book by its dramatization.

"Eugenia" isn't quite as painful as "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Wings of the Dove" were in THEIR stage incarnations, but that's absolutely all I can say for it. Why will these playwrights insist on disturbing Henry's shade? Why don't they go after Ouida, or Gene Stratton Porter, or Elinor Glyn? As a matter of fact, Tallulah Bankhead, who has a very dreary time of it in "Eugenia," might create some fun for herself, and for us, too, if she took it into her head to star in a new version of "Three Weeks," with costumes by Cecil Beaton and a playscript by S. J. Perelman. I have ideas like this all the time, and I throw them out into the void, where they vanish.

However, we can't review the play they didn't do, we have to review the play they did do. In this case, more's the pity. The locale of "Eugenia" is a guest house on the ancestral Wentworth estate near Boston. Old Mr. Wentworth is a prissy bore, and he has two daughters, one a stick like Papa, and one a terribly spirited little creature. On a drowsy summer afternoon, the Wentworth acres are rent by the sound of low gurgling laughter. This disturbance is created by a visiting relative, Eugenia, Baroness Munster, who is separated from her husband, and is accompanied by her rascally brother.

Obvious at the Outset.

Eugenia is an adventuress, that's obvious at the outset. And, it is the peculiar scheme of Randolph Carter, the author of this play, not to allow Eugenia to have any adventures.

Oh, for a time it would appear that Eugenia is corrupting young Clifford Wentworth, a small blond juvenile who has been expelled from Harvard for drinking. That is, she seems to be teaching him that indulgence in alcohol isn't nearly as much fun as hanky-panky in the parlor when the lights are low. All of the Wentworths suspect the worst, but presently it is made clear that Eugenia and Clifford haven't been doing much of anything. She has been tickling him with her fan, and he has been allowing his head to rest in her lap.

When a minister who lives in the neighborhood expresses outrage, Eugenia reminds him that it is not very nice to see evil where there is none. The minister is properly ashamed of himself, and there goes that situation. Poof! Nothing!

Proper Bostonians Are Annihilated.

The greater part of "Eugenia" is given over to tea parties whereat Eugenia and her brother annihilate the proper Bostonians with witticisms approximately as damp as the filling of a cucumber sandwich. There are chess games, and walks round the garden, and chats about china figurines, and a great deal of twirling of parasols and modeling of kimonas, and a lot of flouncing and mincing and twittering.

Once the air is finally cleared of fluttering ribbons and the thin smoke of feeble conversational battles, no less than three sets of young lovers have been set on the path to matrimony, and poor Eugenia has lost her chance to nab a wealthy widower. A few lines of dialog indicate that Eugenia has come a cropper because she is bewildered by the opposing moral and social codes of Europeans and Americans, and I'll bet you a bottle of cheap muscatel that there's a notion borrowed whole-hog from the Henry James original. Borrowed, and not translated into theatrical terms.

Tallulah is playing a world-weary character, that's for sure, but perhaps her performance merely accentuates the weary possibilities. Occasionally she strikes a spark with her familiar guffaws and snarls and sinister shouts. By and large, however, her vivacity rings hollow, and her heart doesn't seem to be in what she is doing. Who can blame her for that?

The supporting artists (Scott Merrill, Jay Barney, Anne Meacham, Tom Ellis, etc.) are OK, and Oliver Smith's setting and Miles White's costumes are handsome.

Daily Mirror

February 2, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Tallu Makes Much Ado About Nothing

• Hurricane that is Bankhead meets vacuum called 'Eugenia.'

There's a remarkable phenomenon at the Ambassador Theatre: a whirlwind in a vacuum. That would be the tempestuous Tallulah Bankhead in an empty little number called "Eugenia." Randolph Carter fashioned the curious charade from a Henry James novel, "The Europeans." Or, rather, hacked it out with a dull chisel.

We recall "The Europeans" as being a right worthy work. That is, if you happen to have a fondness for the fastidious James. It has to do with a couple of worldly continentals, an impoverished baroness and her brother, who visit stuffy relatives in Boston. Object fortune hunting.

THE DILETTANTE brother not only finds a wealthy wife for himself, but also pairs off a duo of baffled belles with proper mates. As for the baroness, she teaches the puritanical Back Bayers a thing or two about tolerance and manners, before taking off for Venice in search of excitement.

John C. Wilson is a producer of taste and discrimination. He must have seen virtues in the Carter script which apparently vanished in rehearsal. For "Eugenia" turns out to be just another vehicle for the fascinating Tallulah. And what she does with it is something to behold.

She goads it, explodes firecrackers under it, storms through it with enormous relish. With a wicked tongue in cheek, she kids the prissy pants off it. It's like watching a brilliant one-woman vaudeville act churning up the dust in a literary desert. She sets up the wooden characters around her like tenpins in an alley, and bowls them over with devastating aim.

MILES WHITE has designed a lavish show, circa 1878, for the vivid Tallu. And she knows what to do with it. The striking costumes range through all the colors of the rainbow. Miss Bankhead, with raven black hair, in a big bun at the back, is a sight to pop the eyes.

Oliver Smith has provided a gingerbready, period background for the contrived complications. And Miss Bankhead scores some swell satiric shots on the atmospheric target. In fact, everything on stage comes under the withering fire of her howitzer-like histrionics.

There are other excellent actors in the cast, such as Reynolds Evans, Anne Measham, Irma Hurley, Robert Duke, Scott Merrill, Jay Barney, June Hunt and Tom Ellis.

Herbert Machiz directed, it says in the program, which means that he has merely arranged groupings about the blazing star. That he has focussed the spotlight on one of the most amazing bravura performances of the semester. A tour de force in the grand manner.

SHAKESPEARE ONCE observed, "The play's the thing," though his oft quoted phrase has a wider connotation. In this instance, the play is not. The important thing is La Bankhead, hoking a feeble fable into a semblance of hilarity.

The New York Times
January 31, 1957

Theatre: Henry James Dramatized

Tallulah Bankhead Is Seen in 'Eugenia'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

HENRY JAMES took a couple of disconsolate whirls in his grave last evening. But there was no use in being vexed. For Tallulah Bankhead was on the premises at the Ambassador Theatre, and nothing anyone wrote could make much difference.

The play is called "Eugenia." Randolph Carter has fashioned it out of James' "The Europeans," which contrasts the worldly guile of fashionable society abroad with the rigid piety of nineteenth century Bostonians. It is a brilliant novel, full of subtle, ironic insights, written in a lapidary style.

But neither Henry James nor Mr. Carter is sturdy enough to sustain one of the Bankhead tornadoes. As Eugenia, Baroness Munster, who is looking in Boston for the security she does not have in Europe, Miss Bankhead gives a bold and booming performance in handsome, flouncy costumes by Miles White, and in the grand manner, also.

No one has to be reminded now that she is a great performer in a theatrical tradition. She is emphatic about everything—emphatic in entrances and exits, emphatic with seemingly innocent phrases in the dialogue, emphatic with umbrellas or scarves or whatever hand props she has access to, emphatic with the lady-like though devastating glance that destroys the propriety of social conversation, emphatic with her rolling walk, emphatic vocally.

●

Purely as theatre it is a remarkable phenomenon. But James' meticulous study of manners cannot cope with performing on this tumultuous scale. Mr. Carter's version may not be a work of equivalent genius, though this is difficult to discover in the circumstances. Nothing subtle can survive in a script when Miss Bankhead is sweeping across the stage. But this much is certain: the impact a European lady has on a reticent Bostonian community becomes a sort of musical comedy pairing off of couples in the current performance. It is commonplace and mechanical when it is interpreted as bombastic theatre.

●

"Eugenia" has been handsomely produced. In his setting of the Wentworth estate near Boston, Oliver Smith has designed a lovely house in a languid wood, and Peggy Clark has lighted it gloriously.

The cast is a good one, under the direction of Herbert Machiz. As the more rebellious of the Boston daughters, Anne Meacham mixes temperament and confusion in a beautiful performance. Jay Barney is excellent as the cautiously reckless Bostonian neighbor; and Scott Merrill gives an admirable performance as the shallow European dilettante who falls in love with a Boston maid. There are good performances also by Reynolds Evans, Tom Ellis, Robert Duke, Irma Hurley, June Hunt and Therese Quadri.

But Miss Bankhead is mightier than the cast, the director, the adapter and Henry James. Not much of Henry survived "Child of Fortune" earlier in the season. In "Eugenia" he has disappeared, unless "escaped" is a better word.

New York Herald Tribune
January 31, 1957

THEATER

'Eugenia'

By WALTER KERR

THERE can be no question whatever that Miss Tallulah Bankhead is an irresistible force, but in "Eugenia" she has flatly, finally and irrevocably met an immovable object.

Lord, how that girl shoves! She's working at it before her parasol, feathers, and trailing chocolate traveling gown have quite surged into view. While various costumed supporting players stand expectantly beneath Oliver Smith's lightly soaring trees, a long, low, lilting laugh enters from the wings, directly followed by our heroine.

• • •

Once on, she slashes at the floor with her parasol, slashes at the nineteenth-century American air with a painted Oriental fan, slashes at her stuffy companions with a snarl that ought to be bottled and sold in place of dexedrine. She rattles off French to a lady-in-waiting without quite stopping the English she is rattling off to everybody else. She exhales like an exhaust fan, guffaws ghoulishly at the thought that it might be better to paint some people after they're dead, billows about the stage looking mighty like Mother Goddam in a mandarin robe, and—when all else fails—reads her longer lines in a species of Gregorian chant that has a maniacal melody all its own.

Every so often one of the lines that dramatist Randolph Carter has culled from Henry James' "The Europeans" supports this sort of aerial bombardment. If, when it is suggested that this visiting Baroness help cure a young American of his addiction to drink, Miss Bankhead is called upon to raise her nostrils high, snort heavily, and cry out "Are you suggesting that I should act as a substitute for the brandy bottle?," then all is well and good. If she is given an opportunity to glare malevolently at a monstrous Boston homestead of the period and cackle something to the effect that "were it not so Swiss, it would be almost Javanese," she knows roughly what to do with the opportunity. Slug it.

• • •

But how do you slug Henry James, especially in a truncated and monotonous adaptation, all night long? Sooner or later you've got to say serious, rather flat things like "Why should I be afraid of you?" or casual offhand things like "Bismarck can be very trying, especially at teatime," and then—even if you're Miss Bankhead—you're stuck. The voice can sound funny and emphatic as it bellows out the first word; it can promise comedy or even character to come; but when the sentence is finished and nothing funny or psychologically fascinating has happened, the world just plain stops dead.

Mr. Carter has neither fashioned the Jamesian fable to fit his star's more spectacular talents nor created an honest version that would challenge her to face up and fight. He has sniffed after plot moments—lovers kissing in the glare of offstage fireworks, two men bursting into the Baroness' darkened living room—and tried to mesh them into a conventional light play. But he has not had the patience to draw a detailed picture of the social contrasts that make these people tick—Europe looking at America, America staring back in stunned disbelief—and without the social groundwork there is no plot. Nine or ten figures float by in a void, as intangible and uninteresting as those fireworks that can't be seen.

Jay Barney suggests something of the displaced worldling as he muses over a chess game puffing a long Oriental pipe, Anne Meachem stamps her foot prettily as a debutante with wicked ideas (but need high spirits lead to such screeching?), and Reynolds Evans and Irma Hurley behave politely enough. But Scott Merrill, as an adventurer who turns out to have a conscience, is hopelessly lost amid his broad 'a's, drawled "y'knows," and inexplicably Germanic pronunciations of proper names. In his performance, as in the play, confusion is slightly rampant.

DAILY NEWS

January 31, 1957

Tallulah Shines in a Weak Play

By CHARLES McHARRY

Beautifully costumed and at her vocal best, Tallulah Bankhead opened in "Eugenia" at the Ambassador Theatre last night. Unfortunately, Miss Bankhead was handicapped. Her right paw was bandaged as the result of overly enthusiastic gesturing in Philadelphia, and she was further burdened by a ream of the flattest lines in recent theatrical history.

"Eugenia" was adapted by Randolph Carter from Henry James' novel "The Europeans." The setting is suburban Boston in June, 1878. I kept feeling at the Ambassador last night that here it is January, 1878. Things didn't move much.

Perhaps it is impossible to adapt James into successful stage entertainment today, except as a curiosity piece. I do not believe this was playwright Carter's motive.

The James Touch

But how can you forgive a second act curtain line which has Miss Bankhead saying: "There is a greater fault than pride, It is to sense evil where none exists." And how about this exchange? "You are so irritating," Tallulah scolds her brother. "I think you mean that you are irritated," is the rejoinder.

So it went for three long acts. The situation at the play's outset seemed promising. Here was the stormy Miss Bankhead playing the role of the Baroness Munster, an American jade come home from Europe to recoup. The heroine is aging, low on money and about to be booted out of a morganatic marriage. She's wrangled a visit to a nest of proper Bostonian relatives and anything can happen.

Does it? Well, she stirs the dullards up a bit and manages to get several people, including her fun-loving brother, married. Stirring the audience, though, was another matter. It didn't happen.

No Help Anyplace

The star received no noteworthy assistance from the cast, but these workers would seem blameless. To speak lines there must be lines. Perhaps even director Herbert Machiz is to be forgiven.

Miss Bankhead's gowns, the highlight of the evening, were designed by Miles White. Oliver Smith was responsible for the set, a sort of Swiss chalet cutaway reminiscent of those old Third Ave. El stations.

"Christophe Colomb"

Daily Mirror

January 31, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Christophe Colomb' Draws a Tribute

• Splendid Performance in French gives theme universal appeal.

Having recently given us the opportunity to see the Old Vic Company in Shakespearean repertory, S. Hurok, the beneficent impresario, is now gifting Manhattan with the Madeleine Renaud & Jean-Louis Barrault Company in a series of plays by notable French dramatists.

To open their season at the Winter Garden Wednesday evenings, Renaud and Barrault wisely chose "Christophe Colomb." Penned by Paul Claudel, distinguished poet, diplomat, and playwright, it is a mystical depiction and interpretation of the life of the explorer who discovered America.

THOUGH DONE in French, the work has such pictorial beauty and eloquence as to be understood and appreciated by those who speak only English. It transcends the barriers of language. It is a brilliant demonstration of stagecraft, a blending of drama, music and dance. It overflows the stage into the orchestra pit.

As the curtain rises, a procession files on from the wings. Its members take places astride the footlights. An Exponent reads the story of Columbus. An Opponent attacks, and a Defender lauds the genius who proved the earth was round and not flat. The spectators take sides, in words and song, after the manner of a Greek chorus.

The first act portrays the incomprehension, and the second the ingratitude, of man. Columbus is introduced as a forgotten and impoverished figure. Then, in a series of flashbacks, his trials, tribulations, triumph and humiliation are shown. Through it all there are symbolical implications that this world is but a prophecy of another and better world beyond.

* * *

THE PRODUCTION by Max Ingrand is stunning. There is a platform, with a square sail overhead, set before a towering cyclorama. As the actors enter, they bring props which suggest an inn, a palace or the deck of a ship. The sail is often lowered, to be used as a screen for the projection of films emphasizing the action. Imaginative lighting provides atmosphere.

"Christophe Colomb" is really a superb pageant. It offers few opportunities for the company's distaff side, though Mme. Renaud has an effective sequence as Isabella. Barrault is superbly graceful and vital as Columbus. And there are outstanding performances by Pierre Bertin, Jean Desailly, Jean-Pierre Granval and Beauchamp (no first name programmed).

In staging the colorful spectacle, Barrault has used every facet of theatre: acting, ballet, song and motion pictures. He has used them with resource. He has achieved fluidity, eye-and-ear appeal.

DARIUS MILHAUD has composed an evocative score to the Claudel text. It is played by an excellent orchestra under the direction of Pierre Boulez.

"CHRISTOPHE COLOMB"

Play by Paul Claudel; staged by Jean-Louis Barrault; decors and costumes by Max Ingrand, with the collaboration on costumes of Marie-Helene Daste; presented by S. Hurok under the auspices of the Government of the French Republic at the Winter Garden Theatre, January 30, 1957. The cast:

Isabelle the Catholic.....
Madeleine Renaud
Mother of Christopher Columbus...Marie-Helene Daste
The Exponent.....Pierre Bertin
Christopher Columbus of the Drama.....Jean-Louis Barrault
The Defender.....Jean Desailly
The Opponent..Jean-Pierre Granval
The Inn-keeper.....Beauchamp
A Creditor.....Georges Cusin
A Sailor.....Jacques Galland
Christopher Columbus of the Legend.....Regis Outin

In writing "Christophe Colomb," Claudel was definitely influenced by Greek tragedy. He was an admirer of Aeschylus. Florentine dilettantes, in an endeavor to re-create the ancient form, gave us opera. Claudel has given us magnificent theatre.

DAILY NEWS

January 31, 1957

'Christophe Colomb' Impresses

By JOHN CHAPMAN

New York City, with Deputy Commissioner of Commerce James J. O'Brien acting as the official greeter in well-spoken French, continued on its friendly kick last evening by welcoming the company of Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault to the Winter Garden. The actors, who are here under the auspices of the French Republic and the guidance of S. Hurok, responded by offering an impressive staging of Paul Claudel's historical pageant, "Christophe Colomb."

This work has a bit of everything in it—ballet, processions, choruses, effective music by Darius Milhaud, recitations, some good acting by Barrault, Regis Outin, Pierre Bertin and others... and even movies. What makes it impressive is that it is all very simply and artfully done, and it hangs together.

Sail in Center

The one basic piece of scenery is a great sail in center stage. Beneath it the pageant of Christopher Columbus' rise and fall unfolds. An excellent orchestra under the direction of Pierre Boulez is in the center of the pit, and it is flanked by an admirable chorus which makes musical comment on events as they occur. Occasionally a film is projected on the sail, to magnify the occurrences taking place below. Generally speaking, the movie moments are not very impressive, but the first film sequence, which shows the hand of God moulding the earth into the shape of Columbus' globe, is very effective.

Claudel's drama is an ironic resume of Columbus' history. It details his early visions of a world to the west, his struggles to find backing, the support he gains from Isabella of Spain. In sharp, clear strokes that make the play almost an artist's line-drawing, it relates the perils and discouragements of the fateful voyage and the ultimate joyful landfall.

Impressive Finale

It continues through the years to reveal an aged and broken mariner who was disgraced because he failed to bring back either gold or slaves. The finale is a pair of mystical and visually impressive scenes in which Columbus watches the funeral of his queen and the queen finally finds her way through the gates of heaven.

"Christophe Colomb," with its libretto by Claudel, its music by his one-time secretary, Milhaud (who made an opera of a longer version), and its staging by Barrault, is an ingenious piece of theatre by a well-ordered company, and nobody could possibly object to last evening's official municipal welcome.

The New York Times

January 31, 1957

The Renaud-Barrault Troupe Returns

'Christophe Colomb' Is Its First Offering

By HERBERT L. MATTHEWS

THE French company of Jean-Louis Barrault and his actress wife, Madeleine Renaud, returned to New York last night with a piece of theatrical magic by the late Paul Claudel, "Christophe Colomb." It is more than three years since the enterprising Sol Hurok brought the famous troupe here. This time we are to see eight new and old plays in French over the next four weeks.

Symbolically, what could be better than a play about Christopher Columbus with which to discover New York anew? It is not a play to like or dislike; in fact, it is not a play at all. It is a poem, a pageant, a series of tableaus, accompanied by music written especially for this version by the French composer Darius Milhaud—and it is very beautiful music. There is ballet. There is even a movie screen in the back, always distorted by the sail of Columbus' ship, which is the one prop on the stage.

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It is as if M. Barrault wanted to show us right at the start what a prodigious showman he is, how he can take intractable and beautiful pieces of poetry—often obscure—and make a valid drama out of them.

The plot is nothing but a series of episodes in the great and tragic life of the man who was the most colossal failure and the greatest discoverer in the history of the world. However, the stage for Claudel was the mirror of eternity and not just a representation of specific characters in a given time and place. Christopher Columbus is every man of genius and faith who ever lived, and the Spain of his day is all human history.

Being profoundly religious, Claudel as always suffused his words and thoughts with mystical feelings. Christopher, in Greek, is the "bearer of Christ," and "une colombe," in French, means a dove and the dove is the symbol of the Holy Ghost.

So there are layers upon layers of meaning in the play, which moves in and out of the present and in and out of life. Sometimes one is confused and bored; more often one is enthralled, for this is the work of one of the great poets of our century. Moreover, he was a poet who had a feeling for the spoken word that is the joy of actors. Not the least of our pleasures in these next four weeks will be to hear French spoken as this wonderfully trained company speaks it.

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The part of Columbus is not one to bring out M. Barrault's best gifts as an actor, but the play does show his genius as a director. Madeleine Renaud plays Isabel the Catholic in two all-too-brief scenes, but it is given to her to carry the final, moving scene when she enters Paradise, praying for the dying Columbus who has opened the way for her. The first act ends with the discovery of America and it is the one exciting piece of drama in the play.

There are few parts in the ordinary sense of the word. Pierre Bertin is a human and authoritative Exponent, the voice of history. Régis Outin plays the part of the old Christopher Columbus of the Legend, and Jean Desailly is a splendid Defender.

The decor could not be more simple—a raised platform, a huge, white sail and a white cloth background. The actors carry their props with them—flags, candlesticks, chairs. Everything is unusual about "Christophe Colomb" and, most certainly, it is a remarkable theatrical experience.

The company's next play will be "Volpone" in the Stefan Zweig-Jules Romains version, starting Monday.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
January 31, 1957

Christophe Colomb

By Bert McCord

Jean-Louis Barrault brought his concept of "total theater" to New York last night with the presentation at the Winter Garden of "Christophe Colomb." This epic drama in verse about the discoverer of America is the first of a series of plays to be given in repertory by the versatile Renaud-Barrault company on its second visit to these shores. It was enthusiastically received by the large audience that turned out to welcome the French players back.

"Christophe Colomb," as staged by M. Barrault, is a spectacular charade that capitalizes on anything and everything. Pandemonium exists when all stops are pulled out in the production numbers and trumpets blare, chorales soar, flags wave and the actors shout on a stage that itself appears to be caught up in all the movement. A pin drops a moment later as the tumult subsides and a baby spot catches the distraught face of Columbus lashed to the mast of his ship.

The aim of the play by the late Paul Claudel is to create an impression of Columbus as an entity, not only as the young man of vision or the grizzled old man in defeat, but of his place in history as well. The kaleidoscopic style of the writing virtually dictated the staging, as the mood shifts from a witty aside delivered by the Exponent, or narrator, who stops the company from performing a scene that isn't "in the book" to the anguished cry of a chorus member who takes pity on the explorer. The declamatory passages are delivered in unison by the chorus, which alternately chants and sings. The dramatic passages are performed periodically in little scenes that are set up by the actors themselves as they carry their minimum of props on and off the stage. Lyric passages are intoned as motion picture excerpts are projected onto the white sail of the caravel that dominates the virtually bare stage.

The play is constantly absorbing from the moment we find the young Columbus reading Marco Polo in his home in Genoa, through the trials and tribulations and poetic retribution, to the end when he joins his beloved Isabella in heaven crying one word, "Land!" Yet, somehow, the very range of the production, from the sly, informal asides, to the solemn processionals, seemed to detract from the intensity of the drama. And while the whole thing was undeniably entertaining, only the two "old-fashioned" scenes proved truly compelling—the one in which Columbus pits himself against his mutinous sailors and the other in which he is chained to the mast and must account to his conscience for his deeds.

As for performance, it was uniformly excellent, as one has come to expect of this talented company which has worked together for so many years. It seems useless to try to single any one out; all are real pros. To the ears of an untrained listener, the accompanying music of Darius Milhaud aptly caught and enhanced the varying moods of the drama.

Before last night's curtain, a young lady burst breathlessly into the Winter Garden lobby to inquire of the man she was meeting, "It this thing in French?" The answer, as she knows by now, is, "Yes," but, as she also knows, it really doesn't make that much difference. A knowledge of the language enables one to appreciate the Claudel verse, but in "Christophe Colomb," the spectacle's the thing. And it is a rewarding one.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
January 31, 1957

'Christophe Colomb' At Winter Garden

By WILLIAM PEPER.

The Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault Co. has combined all the theatrical arts, including the movies, in a stunning production of "Christophe Colomb" which opened a season of French plays at the Winter Garden last night. Instead of choosing a reliable classic to launch its first visit here since 1952, the troupe elected to present Paul Claudel's wildly original history of Christopher Columbus, a moving and beautiful work that is fiendishly difficult to produce.

As star and director, Jean-Louis Barrault had to conjure up just about every known trick of stagecraft to cope with this combination of historical drama, religious pageant and philosophical hocus-pocus.

M. Claudel conceived of Columbus as a visionary chosen by God to discover and bring Christianity to the other half of the world. Columbus presented to the King of Spain the greatest conceivable gift, a whole new world, and received in return only rejection and chains. The play is at once devoutly religious and bitterly ironic. Like Joan of Arc, Columbus could not be tolerated while alive but was venerated after death.

Narrator Employed.

The method used in the play is to have the hero act out episodes from his life while a narrator and a chorus of spectators discuss and sometimes join in the action. To assist the live actors, motion pictures occasionally are called into play. The movie sequences range from the hand of God creating the world to a simple close-up of some part of the action that is going on simultaneously on the stage.

The production is not a lavish spectacle but rather it is an improvised spectacle, which is more in keeping with the method of storytelling. The central scenic effect is an enormous sail that is hung and hoisted at various angles and is used as a sail, a movie screen or just abstract decor.

Superb lighting and a haunting score by Darius Milhaud for chorus and orchestra greatly enhance the drama and the pageantry.

Mexican Gods.

One of M. Claudel's most striking conceits in the play is the scene wherein the Mexican gods of the New World are depicted as fully aware that Columbus is on his way. Afraid that the intruder will unsurp their power, they try to stir up the ocean to sink his ships. In his sequence M. Barrault is unable to keep up with the author's original stage directions.

M. Claudel wrote, "New means must be used here to give an impression of disorder and chaos. Moving mirrors, revolving and deforming mirrors, moving pictures and moving painted screens, the hideous gods all mixed, sometimes feet upward, m i n g l e d with the stormy waves."

M. Barrault ignored that stage direction entirely and suggested the chaos with an undulating rope stretched across the stage instead. In every other detail, however, M. Barrault succeeded brilliantly. His performance as Columbus was a marvel of sweeping grace and impassioned defiance that dominated the play. Others prominent in the cast were Pierre Bertin, Jean Desailly and Jean-Pierre Granval.

Madeleine Renaud contended herself with the relatively small role of Queen Isabella. She will come into her own in later plays in the company's repertory.

New York Post

January 31, 1957

French Columbus Comes to America

By FRANCES HERRIDGE

The brilliant and celebrated theater troupe of Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault, on its second visit from France, opened last night at the Winter Garden with the fanfare due them as an important cultural event. Mayor Wagner sent a representative to welcome them in a warm curtain speech. And though many of Broadway's first-nighters were at the Ambassador watching La Bankhead, they were scarcely missed in the huge Francophile turnout.

The opening bill of six, appropriately, was "Christophe Colomb," which Paul Claudel wrote in 1926 when he was the French Ambassador to the U. S. It is not strictly a play or musical or anything else we are used to—but rather a hymn to Columbus as the unshakable believer, the seeker of another and larger world.

It has elements of epic poetry, pageantry and mystic symbolism. And its format is even more difficult to describe, since it develops on at least two levels. We see Columbus both as the man in his time, and in eternity.

In a series of incidents, staged as pageants, we watch him harassed by money lenders, laughed at by disbelievers, besieged by mutinous sailors, deserted by Queen Isabelle and left to die penniless. But always on the side sits the Columbus of eternity, famous and revered, a symbol of the indomitable spirit that enlarges man's horizons.

Barrault's Staging

Actually, the book is not very substantial as an evening of theater. What gives it life and color and interest is Barrault's imaginative staging. With what he calls total theater, he experiments with every possible art and stage technique to achieve his effects—dance, singing, mime, films, as well as mere acting.

Ingeniously, he flashes pictures on a backdrop to give the audience a close-up which the stage cannot offer. When the backdrop is pulled up, it becomes a sail that billows in the wind. When birds are needed, he has them in the flesh as well as on film. The rope that pulls cargo is then swished to suggest waves. A shadow of a gesticulating sailor aloft indicates land is near. The avarice and ignorance at court become characters in a dance. The actors relax between flashbacks as in rehearsal.

Magical Touch

And so it goes. One unusual device after another, some a bit too clever, but most of them welcome. Barrault here shows his magical theater touch. Now it would be good to see it applied to more provocative drama. For what Claudel has to say is not, after all, very original.

The music and songs, written for the production by Darius Milhaud, catch exactly the spirit of pomp, fear, waiting, sadness and victory. And the whole cast performs with whip-like alertness.

Those who stand out in a sea of new faces are Barrault himself as Columbus, the man, Regis Outin as the legendary Columbus, Pierre Bertin as the Exponent of the piece, and Mme. Renaud as Isabelle.

The French spoken by this group, incidentally, is so beautifully clear that even those with an indifferent knowledge of the language can understand.

"The Potting Shed"

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

January 30, 1957

'The Potting Shed' a Mystical and Intellectually Provocative Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Toward the end of Graham Greene's mystical drama, "The Potting Shed," which was given an admirable production at the Bijou Theatre last evening, Dame Sybil Thorndike, trying to figure out what had happened, said, "I am not sure." Then she remarked, sagely, "When you are not sure, you're alive."

This lovely and luminous actress put the words right into my mouth. I'm not sure, either, about what dramatist Greene was driving at and maybe he wasn't either, but I do feel stimulated. This is an odd play—perhaps a Roman Catholic version of T. S. Eliot's peculiarly fascinating and Episcopal "The Cocktail Party"—and it concerns one singularly odd event which took place in a potting shed or garden tool house.

But, though the play and the event may be odd, the characters it embraces are a profoundly interesting lot, and they are played by a most excellent company which includes, besides Dame Sybil, Robert Flemyng, Frank Conroy, Sir Lewis Casson, Leueen MacGrath and Carol Lynley. It is the first uptown production by Carmen Capalbo and Stanley Chase, sponsors of the everlasting Village hit, "Threepenny Opera," and it is a provocative one.

Detective Story

"The Potting Shed" might be called a spiritual and intellectual detective story. I don't think it would be fair to reveal precisely what happened in this English garden shed some years before the play begins, except to say that the occurrence seemed miraculous. What interests Greene, the playwright, and me, the playgoer, is the fact that what happened has shaped and twisted and made uncertain the lives of several people.

Why has Flemyng, a good newspaper man, been unable to live with the wife he loves, and why has he been unable to find the answer in a long course of psychoanalysis? Why has Rudolf Weiss, his psychoanalyst, run into a blank wall every time he tries to get out of Flemyng the story of what did happen in the shed?

Why has Miss Thorndike shut herself away from her son, Flemyng? And why has his divorced wife, Leueen MacGrath, been unable to get close to him? Why has the once-devout priest, Frank Conroy, become a cynical drunk without faith? Why has Lewis Casson, a physician, refused to face up to the fact he discovered in the potting shed?

These and many more questions Greene puts, not to the audience, but to his characters, and this is what makes the play the interesting affair that it is. In all the company there is only one person who is sure of herself at all times—a young girl played most admirably by Carol Lynley.

Greene does, in his mind if not mine, resolve all his questions. Once the event in the potting shed is squarely faced and understood, the lives of all involved become clear and certain. Too much praise cannot be given to the work of the actors or to Carmen Capalbo's lucid direction. This is a drama for the intellectually curious.

"THE POTTING SHED"

Play in three acts and five scenes by Graham Greene; staged by Carmen Capalbo; designed by William Pitkin; lighting by Peggy Clark; costumes by Patricia Zipprodt; presented by Mr. Capalbo and Stanley Chase at the Bijou Theatre, January 29, 1957. The cast:

Dr. Frederick Baston.....Lewis Casson
Anne Callifer.....Carol Lynley
Sara Callifer..Leueen MacGrath
Mrs. Callifer...Sybil Thorndike
John Callifer.....Stanley Lemin
James Callifer..Robert Flemyng
Dr. Kreuzer.....Rudolf Weiss

New York Post

January 30, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

Graham Greene's Absorbing Drama

After "The Living Room," there was some doubt about whether the distinguished talents of Graham Greene as a writer were adaptable to the purposes of the stage. Any such fear can now be completely dismissed. His new play, "The Potting Shed," which opened last night at the Bijou Theater, is an absorbing and fascinating drama, in which the author's dark and tortured probings into the doubts and torments of religious faith, with especial reference to his own strangely bleak Catholicism, are set down in brilliantly effective theatrical terms. And the acting is superb.

Although Mr. Greene is a Catholic who writes as a Catholic, his highly personal religion seems so dour and upsetting that he almost appears at times to hate it. If "The Potting Shed" uncharacteristically ends on a slight note of hopefulness, it is nonetheless evident that spiritual comfort is not what he is looking for in faith. What he is searching for appears to be a kind of intellectual scourge. While he writes of religion, he is no propagandist for it. The search is into his own soul, and the quest is restless, terribly candid and remarkably moving.

The Mystery

It is by no means necessary to share his passionate convictions to find "The Potting Shed" an enormously provocative drama. For what he has to say he presents this time in the course of an immensely interesting narrative. Indeed, the first half of his play is effective just as sheer theatrical suspense. What is the mystery of James Callifer's boyhood that has made him a lost and lonely man, incapable of affection? Why does his atheistic family keep from him the reason for its horror? In a word, what had happened to him as a child in that potting shed on his father's estate?

To tell this part of his story, Mr. Greene has used all the gift for suspenseful drama that once made his fictional "entertainments" so successful. But, even when he has turned to the expression of his ideas, his theatrical skill remains with him. There is one scene between Callifer and his uncle, a priest who has lost his faith and turned to alcohol, that is as terrible in what it says as it is memorably dramatic in the way he says it. In it, he has presented an unforgettable picture of a man who gave more than his life for a friend. He had given, Mr. Greene says, his soul.

The Agnostic

If "The Potting Shed" is basically a struggle between religious faith and atheism, the author makes it clear it is atheism and not agnosticism that is his enemy. He is, in truth, sympathetic to the agnostic while scorning the atheist. And, if his own viewpoint may be described in brief, it must be in his protagonist's remark that he could not believe in a God he understood. What is important, though, is that, whatever you may feel about Mr. Greene's ideas, you are hardly likely to escape being deeply stirred by his forceful, eloquent and disturbing manner of expression.

The performances are nothing less than masterly. Robert Flemyng is tremendously moving as the protagonist, and there are brilliant portrayals by Sybil Thorndike as his mother, Leueen MacGrath as his ex-wife, Lewis Casson as one of the atheists, Carol Lynley as a wise and winning child, Rudolf Weiss as a sympathetic psychiatrist, and, in particular, Frank Conroy, who is quite amazingly heart-breaking as the tragic priest. Carmen Capalbo has directed with understanding and sympathy. "The Potting Shed" is a distinguished event in our theatrical season.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 30, 1957

A Detective Story For Grown-Ups

By TOM DONNELLY.

The title is the only unattractive feature of Graham Greene's "The Potting Shed" (at the Bijou), and perhaps even that may have a lovely ring for the author's countrymen. In any case, Mr. Greene has written an absorbing drama, employing a number of his favorite themes with an adroitness he certainly did not show in "The Living Room," and has not displayed in some of his more celebrated novels.

Mr. Greene has called this work "a psychological detective story," and that is probably as convenient a label as any. The central figure, James Callifer, is a newspaperman who suffers from a malady common to many a 20th century hero. He does not feel "alive."

Now "The Potting Shed" (that's a place where gardeners keep their tools, seedlings and so forth) is built around a secret that is discussed for some time by the principal characters in accents of dread, fear, and despair.

We are given to understand that when James Callifer was 14 years old, he was involved in a really singular episode which has since been blotted from his memory. His psychiatrist has been unable to uncover it, and his mother, who has all the facts in her possession, resolutely refuses to acquaint her son with them, even when he passionately begs her to relieve him of his torment of doubts and suspicions.

What Is the Secret?

What on earth, the theatergoer will be wondering as he chews his nails, can this secret be? It is quite a tribute to Mr. Greene's gifts as a craftsman to say that when the buried truth is at last excavated it does not lie flat upon the stage, a dusty shred of anticlimax.

Since Mr. Greene is Mr. Greene, the secret has to do with a miracle, a downright supernatural manifestation.

The climactic scene of the second act, James, industriously tracking down the truth about himself, encounters an uncle who is ironically regarded as a Callifer black sheep. This uncle is a Catholic priest, and again it is quite in keeping with Mr. Greene's way of looking at things that the priest should have taken to the bottle as a way of dulling his constant anguished awareness that he does not believe in the God he professes to serve.

Slight Divergence.

Indeed, the priest of "The Potting Shed" has made one of those strange bargains with God, like the heroine of "The End of the Affair."

It is in this area that Mr. Greene's latest work tends to go off the rails. Not necessarily for theological reasons (the doctors and fathers of the church may or may not quarrel with the deeper implications of this "bargain"), but simply because Mr. Greene rather abruptly abandons the priest, in a dramatic sense.

Apart from this loose end, "The Potting Shed" is a brilliantly wrought entertainment, fascinating from first to last. It has bite, it has drive, it has wit, and above all, it has characters who are not the same old shapes filched out of the stencil pile.

The play has been expertly directed by Carmen Capalbo, and the acting is above reproach. Sibyl Thorndike is wonderful, to put it conservatively, as the mother, Robert Flemyng does a fine job of engaging our interest in the tortured hero, Leueen MacGrath is excellent as his wife, Lewis Casson is elegantly comic as a friend of the family first glimpsed rehearsing a funeral oration for a man not yet dead, and Carol Lynley as a frighteningly precocious child, Frank Conroy as the priest and all of the supporting artists are admirable.

Daily Mirror

January 30, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'The Potting Shed' Is a Study of Faith

• Drama achieves movement and warmth —an honest, worthy effort.

The late Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who was quite a one for aphorisms, once observed: "Every dogma has its day." That is the theme of Graham Greene's "The Potting Shed," with which Carmen Capalbo and Stanley Chase launched their managerial program at the Bijou Theatre Tuesday evening.

James Callifer was an unhappy man, a neurotic, because he couldn't remember events in his early life. Then gradually he began to fit the pieces together, with the assistance of a psychiatrist, a curious young niece and a disillusioned priest. He had hung himself in the family greenhouse.

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HIS FATHER, a leader of atheistic and positivist thought, had ridiculed the boy's belief in God. His devout uncle, however, offered in a prayer the thing he cherished most, his faith, in exchange for the child's life. Eventually, the Callifers were reunited through mutual understanding and the miracle.

The matriarchal Mrs. Callifer confessed that she had hardened her heart to relatives, even her son, to protect her husband. He had come to believe, after his boy's resurrection. And she was determined that his skeptical opinions should be upheld and the embarrassing miracle kept quiet.

Greene, who has won renown as a novelist, is, we think, more facile in that medium. As a playwright, he is stiff, prone to substitute argument for emotion. He is highly emotional, but appears afraid to show it. And that's not good for a dramatist. Intelligence is one thing, and theatre another. Of course the two can meet. Take some of G. B. Shaw, for instance.

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"THE POTTING SHED," however, has the virtue of improving as it progresses. After a stodgy start, it manages to achieve a goodly measure of movement and warmth. Its characters become people instead of stained-glass figures in a platform debate. In fact, by the evening's end, the first-nighters were brought to the edges of their seats.

Capalbo and Chase have given this study of faith triumphant the benefit of a stellar cast. Dame Sybil Thorndike, Sir Lewis Casson, Robert Flemyng and Leueen MacGrath bring their cumulative skill and experience to its projection. And there are worthy contributions by Frank Conroy, Carol Lynley, Stanley Lemin, Rudolf Weiss, Richard Longman, Eda Heinemann and Joan Croydon, within Capalbo's directorial scope.

Capalbo and Chase have taken over the small Bijou Theatre with the idea of presenting plays there that might be considered noncommercial by other producers. They intend to turn the intimate playhouse into a venturesome off-Broadway enterprise in the center of Broadway. And we're all for it.

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WE DOUBT that any Main Stem management would have done "The Potting Shed," and we are certain that none could have persuaded such distinguished players to lend their gifts for such slim returns. That is, financially speaking. But the dedicated — God love them — don't weigh profits.

So, we think "The Potting Shed," despite its faults, made an auspicious and idealistic bow. It's wonderful to have Dame Sybil and Sir Lewis with us. And it's a pleasure to salute young producers of vision and courage.

Journal-American

January 30, 1957

A Fine Play For 2 Acts-- But 3d Lags

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE world premiere of Graham Greene's "The Potting Shed," which took place at the Bijou last night, was notable for a variety of reasons. It launched the youthful firm of Carmen Capalbo and Stanley Chase, who gave us "The Threepenny Opera" in the Village, as an up-town producing firm; it brought back to us Dame Sybil Thorndike, one of the great ladies of the theatre, with a brilliant cast, and it revealed a fine two-act play. What a pity the play was written in three acts!

For in the first two stanzas all that is skilled and captivating in Mr. Greene's writing comes into sharp being. It has ingenious suspense, it poses his provocative questions about life and religion and examines them incisively; we are caught and beguiled by the characters. But he unhappily lets much of this excellent groundwork trail away in a last act which is repetitious and uneventful.

Intriguing Events Unfolded

In his consideration of the mysterious blight on the son of a respectable and literate British household, the author gets away on a highly intellectual whodunit kick. The young man has not been invited to his own father's funeral, but he comes anyway to discover why his mother has neglected him. Little by little he is led to the events in his past, most of them taking place in the "potting shed," which provoked his curious banishment.

An enormous range of ideologies is covered. There is the strong protective instinct of the mother, a conviction that it is better to "let dead dogs lie"; the sharp contrast between the old-time physician and the modern-day psychiatrist, and one of Mr. Greene's deep probings into faith, miracles and the transmutation of belief. All this is intelligent, provocatively submitted, and the talk holds true for two acts. But then the suspense is lifted, and for most of the last portion of the play the same things are re-said, the action falters and the interest lags.

It is a great tribute to the acting of Miss Thorndike, Robert Flemyng, Leueen MacGrath, Lewis Casson, Frank Conroy, and the others, that even this final chapter, which has so little to do but pull the ends together, still exerts some pull on the clients as well. We all know the story by now, but when Miss Thorndike comes onstage we will listen to her with respect even in a redundant confessional.

Assurance Shown

Robert Flemyng, who has a great deal to do as the renounced young man in the family, does it all with assurance and sympathy; Leueen MacGrath is fragile and attractively bewildered as his ex-wife; Lewis Casson is a strenuously unyielding doctor of the old school; Frank Conroy has a towering episode as a clergyman who has lost his faith and discovered the bottle, and Rudolf Weiss is a plausible and articulate psychiatrist.

Carol Lynley, a very decorative young lady in her teens, makes an auspicious Broadway debut in an important role as a perceptive niece; and Richard Longman, Eda Heinemann and Joan Croydon complete the company with strong assists. William Pitkin has devised a series of sets capably conveying the interiors of a country house, a boarding house in Nottingham and a Presbytery in East Anglia.

"The Potting Shed" is always enlightening, frequently exciting, but it is my regretful feeling that it is one act too long for impatient New York audiences.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
January 30, 1957

THEATER

'The Potting Shed'

By WALTER KERR

GRAHAM GREENE likes to shock at both ends of the scale: at the level of natural horror, where fourteen-year-old boys are driven to wrapping nooses around their necks and hanging themselves in toolsheds; and at the level of supernatural horror, where simple miracles walk into materialist living-rooms and rattle the secure scientific creeds of professional unbelievers.

That may sound complicated, but Mr. Greene's second thrust at the theater—"The Potting Shed"—is quite a complicated play. It is also, I think, a very good one in its restless, defiant, edgy way—or at least it is a strangely compelling one.

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Robert Flemyng, as a gaunt young man with empty eyes and a habit of fidgeting feverishly with a dog collar, comes into his childhood home with a stubborn question on his lips. His dying father has expressed no wish to see him. His fiercely intelligent mother, superbly played by Sybil Thorndike, bars his way to the sickroom with hands that shake and a voice that begs. His divorced wife, who has never truly known him, stares at him in bewilderment.

And he is a sickening mystery to himself, a dead man who has felt nothing since an unexplained illness in his youth—and who can remember nothing that took place before that.

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The bitter, haunted, nerve-wracked search for the secret of this man's malaise—and the terror that lashes at him from the eyes of every member of his family—takes up two-thirds of a troubled, absorbing evening. We are led through Mr. Greene's characteristically labyrinthine ways: through an impassioned inquisition in which a mother savagely sacrifices her son's happiness to her husband's good name; through a caustic and inconclusive contest with a psychiatrist who has had his own share of anguish; through a quiet, scalpel-sharp probing into the despair of a drunken priest who "does his job" and doesn't believe a word of the Latin he mumbles in the weary mornings-after.

The path is erratic, theatrically jumpy, sometimes blocked along the way by obstrusive and tantalizing symbols. But it is a path that moves, that commands your attention, that insists you join the search party.

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And when it comes to a clearing, there is both clarity and candor on Mr. Greene's part. As in his novel, "The End of the Affair," Mr. Greene has dared to invite the supernatural in to tea. In this rationalist family a miracle is as much a blot on the scutcheon as a murder case; but the miracle comes. It does not win over the minds that have shied from it. It only, as some one says, "spoils our certainties." And it brings an odd release in its anti-dogmatic wake—"When you're not sure, you're alive."

The matters that intrigue Mr. Greene, the values that seem to him to cry out for restatement are tricky and elusive, in themselves dramatically undemonstrable. Yet it seems to me that he has come closer to success here than in "The End of the Affair," where an abrupt shattering of texture took place, or in "The Living Room," where the audience required more faith than the characters. The unrelenting eye of the author is steady here, the tone quietly honest and cracklingly literate, the psychological detective-story processes firm enough to overcome the play's technical awkwardnesses.

And, under Carmen Capalbo's direction, there is great help from a knowing company. Mr. Flemying's lined, defeated face makes an intractable problem seem deeply personal. Miss Thorndike's determined matriarch, her mouth set in asterisk precision and her fingers working eternally on the ring that means so much to her, is a stunning figure. Leueen MacGrath brings a swift intimacy and warmth to her tentative gropings for a love that has baffled her, and Lewis Casson, Rudolph Weiss, Edna Heinemann, and Frank Conroy are all first-rate. Mr. Conroy must not be skimped: his hollow priest, ironically observing that his parishioners in the confessionial must prefer the smell of "whisky to that of bad teeth," is perfectly, pungently drawn.

The New York Times
January 30, 1957

Theatre: Greene's 'The Potting Shed'

Drama From England Opens at the Bijou

By BROOKS ATKINSON

DON'T expect the familiar facility of ordinary playwriting in Graham Greene's "The Potting Shed," which was acted at the Bijou last evening.

But you can expect original characters and provocative ideas. As usual, Mr. Greene is blundering down the tortuous labyrinth of life, meeting people who have a scar on their souls. They are looking for something that corresponds to a "clearing in the woods." Eventually Mr. Greene takes them there, diffidently but with a last-act feeling that duty has been done.

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"The Potting Shed" begins ineptly, like a latter-day nineteenth-century thesis drama; and the characters are like figures in a dramatic museum. But Mr. Greene has a real subject in mind. James Callifer, son of a celebrated non-believer, is consulting a psychiatrist to find out why there is a nothingness inside him and why he cannot love people who are obviously worthy of love.

Abetted by a mischievous niece, who likes to meddle in adult affairs, the author and the psychiatrist track down the source of the psychosis. When James was a small boy he tried to hang himself in the family potting shed. Apparently he was dead. But he returned to life. Was the return a miracle? Mr. Greene thinks that it was, and he sets about illuminating it.

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The illumination involves one calm though profoundly moving scene in the second act when James visits an uncle who is a priest, to get all the facts of the miracle. The last act does not have quite that much emotional intensity. But when James goes home to visit his mother again and the woman he has divorced, Mr. Greene is again writing like a man of conviction and understanding. In everything that matters in a playwright Mr. Greene is first-rate. He has a theme. He has the power to develop it. And he goes to the heart of it with courage and clarity and faith.

Like an honest Briton, Mr Greene underwrites. The stiff upper lip makes his first act seem like Henry Arthur Jones disciplined by Somerset Maugham. Although big subjects are discussed, Mr. Greene keeps his voice low and his literary style reticent. But he is entitled to write in the style that he finds most congenial. And the fact remains that "The Potting Shed" is full of seeds that flourish and yield a bountiful harvest in the last half of the play.

Must the performance be so civilized? It has been directed with taste by Carmen Capalbo, and it is skillfully acted by accomplished players. Sybil Thorndike plays the implacable mother with a strength and a plainness of purpose that are effective. As James, the moody son, Robert Flemyng gives an effortless performance that is intelligent and lucid.

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Lewis Casson plays an elderly doctor with plausibility and neatness of characterization. As James' divorced wife, Leueen MacGrath gives a relaxed, honestly-motivated performance that is in her best vein. Edna Heinemann, Carol Lynley and Rudolf Weiss play three of the other roles agreeably.

As the priest who exchanged his faith for James' life at the time of the attempted suicide, Frank Conroy has a role that may be the most ingratiating in the drama. He plays it with a warmth and humility that are overwhelming, and give "The Potting Shed" its finest moments on the stage.

William Pitkin has provided three sets that capture the various moods of the story. Give Mr. Greene a little time to get started. But once he has his theme in hand, "The Potting Shed" is an original drama that probes deep into the spirit and casts a spell.